

# MANY FOREIGN PLAYWRIGHTS INVADING NEW YORK

Sacha Guitry, French Favorite, Franz Molnar of "Liliom" Fame and David Pinsky, Idol of the Yiddish Theatres, Only Three of a Score Represented on the Stage Here

SACHA GUITRY, versatile actor-author, son of Lucien Guitry, did not get to the American stage until after a long period of success in Paris. From his debut as *enfant gâté* of the Parisian public, and as such he could write and say things that would be hissed in his contemporaries. But these things sounded really dreadful or even shameful when translated into English, and his first play to reach us—under his name, be it understood—was a polite thing, not a bit like his output that Paris had chuckled over for a decade or longer. Clean as it comparatively was, "Deburau" held a good deal of the Sacha Guitry quality.

But there had long been a suspicion, that now and then darkened to a certainty, that certain of his pieces really had reached the American public, but almost unrecognizable in their new clothes. The Society for the Protection of French Dramatic Authors thought so, too, but when it took legal advice it hesitated, for the burden of proof lay too heavy.

The counting up of that fairy gold, unpaid royalty is a sport which other foreign authors shared with the popular Frenchman. The Hungarian playwrights in particular nursed the bitter thought that many of their plots and much of their sparkling dialogue got to the American public in a roundabout way without paying toll. It has been alleged that the modern school of Hungarian authors who write in the universal vein are responsible for nearly half of the successes of our stage, that these successful pieces have been either wholly or partly adapted from Hungarian plays, whose writers have been given neither credit nor money.

## No Protection Since the War For the Hungarian Playwright

A copyright tangle, due to the war's embargo, has arisen since 1912, from which date Hungarian authors received protection for their brains. With Wilhelm's descent upon Belgium, this protection ceased, and at the present time the United States Government gives protection only to the authors of those countries which extended the same favor to American authors during the war. Everything from Hungary in the line of literary output has been on the free list since 1912.

This may be sport to the American play boys, but it is death to the Hungarian frogs.

What were the Hungarian playwrights to do? Financial returns in their own country are at a low ebb, but New York offers a big market. It was wisdom then for as many of the recognized authors as had money for their voyage to come to this country and take advantage of it. Here they are protected in their property rights as aliens by a State law. A good many of the playwrights are already here and others are said to be on the way.

Playwrights of other European countries, hearing of this migration, have been prompt to join the movement. Italy is now represented in this country by several leading dramatists; Poland has a score here happily working at musical comedy and tragedy; France, was, of course, already on the ground and only Germany seems backward. A reason for this is not the anti-German feeling, but because Germany's original plays often stem from Polish and Hungarian roots.

Melchior Lengyel, author of "The Typhoon" and "The Dancer," to name but two of his pieces which have been seen here, is now in his second year's residence in New York and apparently without home sickness. It is his contention that foreign plays, including, of course, his own, should be left in the atmosphere created by their original author, who may be supposed to have lived among his characters. Seen as their authors conceived them, with the action passing among people he has known from his childhood, a foreign play becomes instructive while losing none of its truth and dignity. A play thus left in its home provides color to the American stage and has its influence in the development of American dramatic art.

## Adaptation the Worst Fate In Mr. Lengyel's Opinion

The harm done to foreign plays by an unskillful attempt to transfer them to our stage by giving American names to persons who are essentially Hungarians or Italians or other races is, Mr. Lengyel thinks, far reaching and irremediable. "Adaptation" is the worst fate a foreign writer is called upon to endure.

How does it happen, under such shut in circumstances, that the Hungarian has given so much vivacity to play making? How does it happen that every stage bears its impression? The answer may be found in the race itself, which is a race with a future that they will probably attain now that Vienna no longer dominates their ambitions. The Hungarian playwright and novelist is almost as a rule high spirited, brilliant and enthusiastic. He's a little out of perspective, truly, in what he thinks he knows about the rest of the world and he believes Budapest to be the centre of culture rather than Paris; but this refreshing egotism helps to keep his playwrighting a national product. He can afford to be original as long as he holds to the thought that no other race is producing anything worth stealing.

Ludwig Biro is another foreigner who intends to make his home here in "Czarina," his play which David Belasco has accepted for production, succeeds in winning the favor they hope for. Biro has lived in Rome for several years; he was in the Eternal City at the outbreak of the world war, and his work for the stage has not suffered the hiatus caused by it in the case of fellow authors. But the returns are not great for stage writers in Rome or anywhere in Italy at the present time, and Biro is wise in following personally his new market. A famous piece of his is "The Yellow Lily," which he hopes to see done in English.

From Vienna comes Albert Szimral, author of "Count Michael," that may be produced this season by Richard Gallo, impresario of the San Carlo Opera Company. Emma Trenini will play the leading role of this piece, which is already known to us in book form. Victor Jacobi, author of "Rambler Rose" and "The Marriage Market," is here fully

Three leading foreign invaders of the American playwrights' field. Left to Right: David Pinsky, whose works are popular on the Yiddish stage; Sacha Guitry, author of "The Grand Duke," a Belasco success; Franz Molnar whose "Liliom" is having a great New York run.



sums earned by men in this country whom they scarcely would admit to the rank of dramatic author. Why then don't these men come over for the purpose of taking the "cream off the top of the bottle?"

Whoever asks this question seriously does not know what a literary man of reputation in France (particularly in Paris) thinks of literature in any other country.

An author whose earliest work appeared in Germany is David Pinsky, who came to this country with a double object—to finish his education and to pursue his favorite craft, writing plays. As he writes, or has written, most frequently in Yiddish, his product may not be so well known as it should be. One piece by him was in a recent season presented by the Theatre Guild. It

had a success of criticism not accompanied by popularity.

German plays which have had a real influence on American dramatic literature may be counted on one hand. Suderman's "Magda" and one or two other pieces, and Hauptmann's poetic and socialistic plays are perhaps the best liked and have made a permanent niche for themselves in our theatre. "The Sunken Bell," which is a genuine contribution to the world's dramatic literature, is Hauptmann's high mark, either at home or here, although there are critics who would award it to the somewhat formless "Weavers."

The poetic play, "The Sunken Bell," arranged in an opera libretto by Charles Metzger with music by Carl Ruggles, has been, it

is said, "half accepted" for production by Mary Garden. This singing actor has found a congenial role for herself in the fascinating world of the play—perhaps.

Benevise and the Quintero brothers represent fine phases of the modern drama school of Spain, and the former at least has won fame in America by adaptations of his work. In fact, "The Passion Flower," by Benevise, in translation and performed by Nance O'Neill and an excellent company, was a feature of a season or two ago.

The success of this piece, which was taken over into our language without any stupid features of adaptation, but preserving in every detail its native character, has put the idea into Benevise's head of coming to this country to live and work.

Owing to the immigration of so many foreign writers who purpose to learn English and make English plays, actors of reputation on the other side are spurred on, it is said, to learn English and get a chance to appear here in the anticipated pieces. This all makes for the great increase in the use of the English language, and will tend to expedite its reputation as a universal tongue. By many people of the stage English is already so considered, but not by either French actors or playwrights. The latter are still jealous of the supremacy of their language and are likely long to continue to be.

## Actors Also Spurred On to Invade the United States

Some of the more famous Italians, on the other hand, while they would probably not yield in their admiration of the *bella lingua* to any foreign tongue, are nevertheless, for commercial reasons, studying English, and intend to write plays and novels in it. The modern school of Italian dramatists have formed themselves on English models rather than on French, and the lighter pieces now current could be carried over to our stage without confusion of idea or character. Interesting as this fact may be, the school of Anglo-Italians does not represent the most worthy output of drama in Italy. Such men as Sem Benelli are first of all Italian. If representatives of this higher kind of writing were to emigrate to America all the tremendous benefits that are predicted from the influx of foreigners might be more easily digested.

In this connection and by a connotation of ideas it may be said here that while the play of Benelli, "The Jest," which introduced him to Americans, was condensed, it was not adapted. Edward Sheldon, who made the version seen here, himself a playwright, did nothing to change the atmosphere of "The Jest." Indeed, its great success was in a large measure due to keeping the piece in its original atmosphere.

Molnar (Franz), who is perhaps the most popular of the foreign writers for the stage who have been given a fair chance to prove themselves here—that is, to show that their drama was big enough to stand the strain of translation into a foreign tongue—is not coming to this country. Last March a rumor spread that the famous Hungarian would come over to see for himself what the Americans thought of "Liliom," but he has changed his mind.

# Serious Books Lead in Demand Now, Says Publisher

George H. Doran Finds War Has Changed American Public's Taste to Its Advantage

By WILLIS STEELL.

DURING the course of a desultory book "shop talk," George H. Doran, the publisher, said: "The public liking for a book or a class of books is an epidemic and we publishers are always hoping that the epidemic will strike us. Any of us is sure to be a willing victim."

"But we cannot direct or foresee the popular taste which is frequently, or perhaps it is truer to say, occasionally the growth of a whim that rooted first no man knows where. Sometimes it is possible to see in advance the circumstances accreting, so to speak, that will insure a public for a book on a certain subject. More often wisdom of this kind is an affair of hindsight."

Mr. Doran said many other things, some of them of the kind that were to be anticipated, others that were novel and surprising. Among the latter was this one:

"The author of a book is almost sure to make some money out of it; the publisher is not so sure."

This paradox required explanation and it was forthcoming. Mr. Doran did not intend to refer to whatever sum an author might receive as advance royalty, but to the author's percentage on the sales of his book.

"It is very rare," said he, "that a book which has been carefully considered for publication with the verdict resulting that it has a 'chance' doesn't sell at least 1,500 copies, and at a ten per cent. royalty, the usual amount, the author receives, roughly speaking, \$150. Thus he does get something, while on the other hand, if the book stops there, the publisher is out of pocket."

## Some Authors Get \$50,000 On Turning in Manuscript

"There are half a dozen authors on our list to whom we freely pay \$50,000 for the rights of a manuscript they bring to us, knowing certainly that the book will yield us at least that and believing about as certainly that it will yield us more. Such authors, taking into account their serial, moving picture and translation rights in a book, can count on an income from it of \$100,000."

"In general the book writer has a better chance of placing his wares than the playwright. With equal talent displayed, the author may be pretty sure of being published, while the cost of stage production being so much greater than the printing and publishing of a book, the playwright frequently has nothing but his trouble for his pains."

"Every publisher brings out now and then a book to please himself, being perfectly aware that it will never sell. Perhaps some of them do this quixotic thing to save their faces, that is, to preserve a reputation for taste and the possession of ideals, but I do not think this is a general explanation. A publisher does it once in a while because he can't help himself, because he is human like the rest of mankind and is moved, extra-commercially, by his own likes and dislikes. "They call me a commercial publisher. Well, I am in the sense that I manufacture books for the purpose of selling them. I accept the definition in good part, reserving the right to say, however, that it does not define what I seek to get in my list are the books covering all current thought. I am as broad as that."

"My theory of book publishing is drawn from the agriculturist who practices for the benefit of his fields what is known as 'mixed farming.' I believe in rotation of crops."

"Up here, too, we follow a standing rule: it's 'Give the newcomer a chance.' " Quickly dropping reference to his own firm's output, Mr. Doran turned with apparent relief to a general talk on publishing conditions. They are, he said, excellent. Indeed, he spoke more strongly, pronouncing that they were never better. In the present

stagnant condition of mercantile business, this strong expression seemed rather surprising.

"Remember," he warned, "that we are speaking not of one class of books, and not primarily of fiction, but of the mass of the publishers' output. We can pass by, therefore, any further consideration of publishers' failures, which are chiefly interesting as providing an index to the publisher's ideals, and say that never in the history of literature in America has there been such an increase in the number of readers or, as this may or may not indicate, so widespread an interest in all kinds of books. The records of book selling tell this story plainly."

"If you ask me what books are indicated in this way to be in largest demand at the moment, the answer is ready. They are books of history, biography, autobiography, reminiscence, and all sorts that go under the common title of 'information.'"

"This splendid growth of reading I attribute to several causes. One of these is the effect of the war. Thousands of our young men went over and caught a glimpse of Europe. They received hints of European culture, historical references to places and peoples reached their ears. Perhaps every doughboy saw or heard something that made him say to himself, 'When I get back home, if I ever do, I'm going to inform myself about that.'"

"It's an experience common to us all who visit strange countries. At the time we haven't the books to consult and we don't know the teachers who could explain. But when we return we beg, borrow or buy (you see I put that last) the book out of which we can dig the information needed."

"Then there is the army educational system, one of the good things that grew out of the war; it spread books among men who felt keenly at a critical time their need of technical training; these men made up their minds not to be found wanting again if the reading of books could help them."

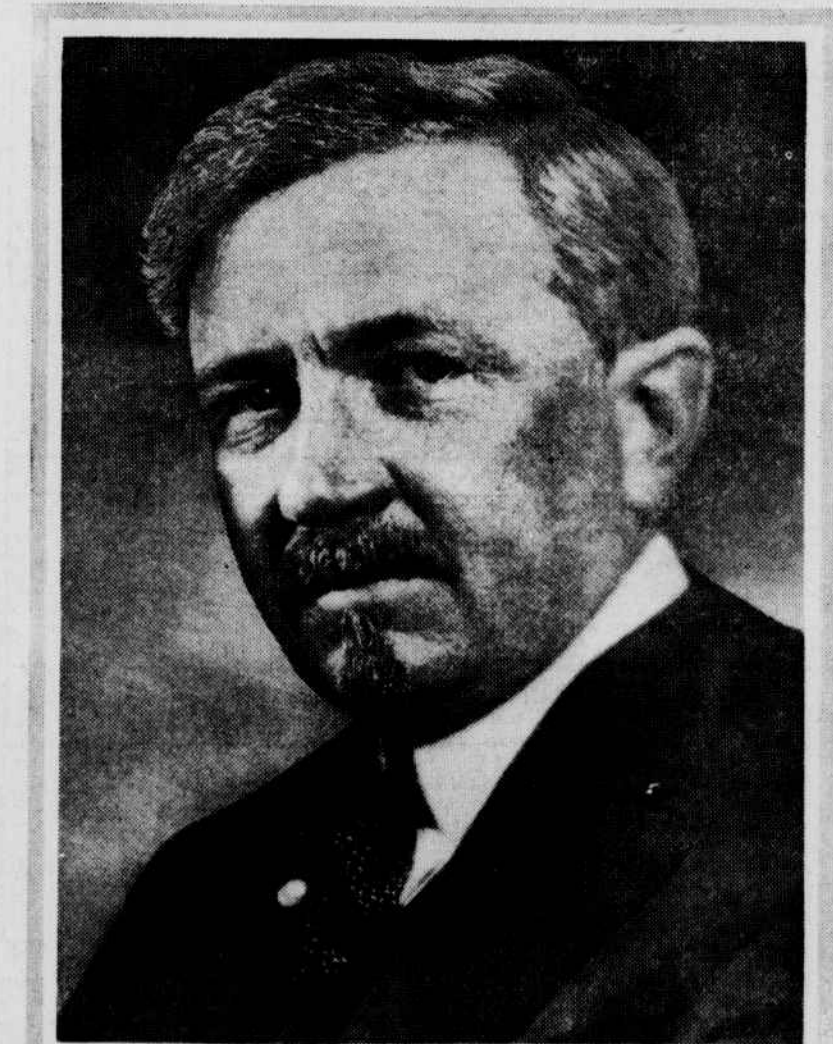
"The hunger of our returned soldiers for knowledge is one of the things that account for an increased literacy, sufficiently large to be noticeable. I understand there has been a real spread of education, both secondary and advanced."

"Everybody knows that colleges and schools are crowded to-day as never before. Everybody will know through the next census how much larger is the percentage of persons who can read and are capable of enjoying books. In this census report will be included the figures showing the assimilation of the foreign born, indicative of the horde of children of immigrants who are now speaking English and who read books in English."

"Nobody will forget either the effect of women's suffrage. The entrance of women into business and politics has stimulated the reading of women to more serious literature and there has been in the young reading clubs, circles, &c., where history, political economy and topics of worldwide interest are now studied with avidity."

"It would be impossible to estimate the vast amount of reading done by the average man and woman of daily papers and popular

Camera study of George H. Doran, publisher, who sees a trend toward more serious books and a new era opening for American writers.



weeklies. They run into many millions. All this develops the reading habit and it is only a short step from liking to read to the reading and getting the good out of books."

Mr. Doran is an optimistic, but not a Pollyanna publisher. And he was not prophesying, but setting forth facts from which he thinks he has the right to draw shining conclusions. The brightest of these is to be found, he thinks, in the circumstance that the age of repression in literature has been passed. Repression is a bad thing always and doubtless it works for ill in literature as in the physical world. This all round critic of book manners is for letting the young "yawn" be heard. He would not insist on more if the world finds the "yawn" disagreeable.

"We are entering on a new period of American literature," said he, "and every man with his finger on the pulse of public taste is aware of it. Up to a few years ago

we in America had been chiefly derivative in our books. Now we are on the threshold of a new American era of novels, plays and poetry. In certain respects we are doing better work than the British and the country is very much awake to the voices of its younger writers."

"This is the day of free expression. A broader or a franker spirit crept up in literature prior to the war; we saw it coming in 1908 and it could not be stifled by the conservatives."

"However," added the publisher with a broad smile, "the Britishers started it. When nobody here dared to write of human things boldly, Bennett, Swinerton, Beresford and Walpole took the lead. Now these men are called the old writers, which means that they have been carried over to conservatism, but that is true in life always, the pioneers become the old settlers, their original aspirations settle into rules and convictions. A new lot come along and blaze new trails."

Books of personal reminiscences, anonymous or otherwise, have had a surprising vogue, especially the latter, where "The Gentleman with a Duster" and the author of "The Mirrors of Washington" found ready acceptance. Evidently, Mr. Doran thought, people are curious about other people whose names for one reason or another are notorious.

A thing to be noticed in connection with the popularity of such books is their high cost. "Eminent Victorians," "Queen Victoria," "The Outline of History," "Banished Pompeii of Yesterday," "Roosevelt's Miscellanies," put out by various publishers, are all books that cost from \$4 to \$10. "Our Family Affairs," by Benson, which has been called a counter irritant to Mrs. Asquith's mem-

oirs, because it gives a kinder impression of British society, is another high priced publication, the sales of which are on the way to being remarkable. "Letters to Isaac," by Lord Shaw, one of Scotland's most famous advocates, may or may not do all that is hoped from its genial, witty and wise contents.

It is not to be taken for granted that there isn't to be cakes and ale of fiction because of the vogue of serious books. Mary Roberts Rinehart, Irvin S. Cobb, yes, and Ralph Connor, still sell wildly and only the latter can by remote implication be numbered among writers of history. Beginning as an author patronized by seekers of books of a religious tendency to be offered as gifts, this author produced in "The Sky Pilot," "No Man's Land" and "To Him That Hath," as the results of his view of the war, a quite different output. He holds his own, a tremendous audience, in spite of the change.

So there is still an abundance of fiction. While this urbane publisher dwelt with unctious on the serious books, the "near classics," his guest was thinking of the ten low tables in the big reception room which he had particularly observed was laden with the lightest kind of fiction. Fiction with one exception—a "Life of St. Paul"—made up their burden and even that, if the author derives in a degree from Renan, may be a sort of novel. Reminded of these numerous novels, Mr. Doran said quite casually:

"Oh, we don't have to expose the serious books, which sell themselves."

## Relation to the Author Now Is Changed by Larger Market

The relation of publisher and author is a perennially interesting topic and it gains greater interest now because the movies in a mad hunt for plots have added power to the latter. Indeed, the author at the moment is becoming, they say, a highly commercialized person, with big ideas about the money value of his product, as he may well be, since he has three ways of selling it. With increased importance, some of our authors take on the airs of a dictator. However, to support this character they need the votes of a plebsicite.

"We are old fashioned here," said Mr. Doran, "and ours is a friendly place for authors. We aim to preserve toward them the ancient courtesy that a good many people fancy has gone out or never was more than legendary. Interesting talks take place here and views are interchanged which ought to help both author and publisher. It is always necessary for both to remember that the making of books is a business."

"Keeping that in mind the sales of our serious books furnish the best proof of the remarkable change in the wants of book buyers. I have in mind at least twelve titles, books of weight and substance, that have reached the 45,000 mark and it is no derogation of their worth to say that books of the same class would scarcely have paid expenses. Some, but not all of these works have owed their successful sales to circumstances. The book of former Ambassador Gerard, which sold to 250,000, was one of these."

While Mr. Doran frankly admitted that he was in business, the fact that the authors with whom he deals are in it also seems to be well established. The writer had a proof of this in a letter written to publishers broadcast by an author of fiction of a high kind that has gained him reputation and bread if not cake. With an extract from it that rather conclusively fixes the commercial taint, if it be one, on him, this excursion into the publishing realm may fitly close. He wrote:

"I don't give a hoot how the publisher names my royalties; I am not interested in percentages. I want to make money; and I know the only way I can get it is by the sale of copies of this book. I would rather have 5 per cent. or 1 per cent. or a tenth of a per cent on a half a million copies than fifty per cent. on a thousand."

This was only a prelude to a proposed scheme of partnership, or "trial marriage," between author and publisher. It would indicate that the author, celebrated as he undoubtedly is, has set up the golden calf. No more need be said in his case because he does not write serious books.